

An Early Eighteenth Century Garden Bosquet at Purdysburn, Co. Down

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Although remodelled in the mid-Victorian era, the formal *patte d'oie* garden bosquet at Purdysburn was a rare survival from a period when geometric garden layouts were the stylistic norm everywhere in Europe. Evidently dating to the 1735-45 period, this garden was typical of the kind of formal garden associated with houses of the later 17th and early 18th century. It survived into the Victorian era when it was remodelled with the addition of a central canal or long pond. The main structure of the garden survived intact until the 1960s, but after the house was demolished it fell into decay. Although rather neglected and overgrown, the garden still exists and could be restored. Unfortunately, misleading terminologies, such as 'Union Jack Garden', have served to give the garden a political dimension which it does not possess. This short paper attempts to trace the history Purdysburn and place the historic garden in its correct context.

Eighteenth Century Purdysburn

Many people in Belfast today are probably familiar with the name and location of the Hydebank Wood Young Offender' Centre, lying 1½-miles south-south-west of Newtownbreda in the southern suburbs of the city. The college occupies the site of Purdysburn house, once one of the principal country houses and associated demesnes around Belfast. Although the main house was demolished in August 1965, many of Purdysburn's outbuildings still remain, together with substantial relics of its once famous gardens, which lay on ground below the house.¹

Although the house was remodelled in the 19th century, it had much earlier origins. The site lies in the townland of Ballydollaghan, within the Civil Parish of Drumbo and barony of Upper Castlereagh, Co. Down, on the old road to Lisburn. The townland, divided into two units of 377 acres and 272 acres, is first mentioned in a grant made in 1607 to George Sexton of Dublin from Sir Hugh Montgomery and Con O'Neill. The name 'Purdysburn', which derives from a small stream running through the townland to the Lagan, was apparently named after one John Purdy, the owner of a mill in Ballycowan immediately to the south.

The earliest reference to the house named 'Purdysburn' is from a document dated 1712, indicating that a residence had been built here by James Willson (1680-1741), a successful merchant with Carrickfergus and Belfast links, who had started to acquire blocks of lands in the area from at least 1708. He served as a JP and married one Armanella MacMullan of Drumbeg (died 1740), probably around the time he built his house at Purdysburn.² It is not yet clear if his new house was *de novo* (built on a greenfield site) or whether it incorporated an earlier building.

James Willson of Purdysburn died in 1741 and was succeeded by his son Hill Willson (1707-1773), presumably named by his father in honour of his neighbour at Belvoir, the politician Arthur Hill, first Viscount Dungannon (1694-1771). Hill had been born in 1707 at Carrickfergus, married a Miss Lutwidge (died 1773)³ and in a successful career served as High Sherriff of County Antrim and Collector of

Customs for the Port of Belfast.⁴ Hill Willson, who was already successful in his own right by 1741 embarked upon a major rebuilding programme at Purdysburn. Indeed, the remodelling of house and gardens appears to have already started in the late 1730s, as indicated by a date stone of 1740 in the summerhouse in the walled garden. When writing in 1744, Walter Harris was able to refer to 'a house and pretty improvements of Hill Willson Esq.'⁵ at Purdysburn and the property was of sufficient standing to be designated on Kennedy's 'Map of the County of Down' dated 1755 (see below) and that by Taylor & Skinner of 1777.

While the house was later remodelled substantially in the 1820s, the main formal gardens as created in c1735-45 period remained unchanged when shown on the 1834 edition of the Ordnance Survey map (see below). The formal garden was created below the east side of the house on lower ground and took the form of a parallelogram, that is to say it was a quadrilateral with opposed sides parallel. It was (and is still) enclosed with brick-lined walls, 115 x 100 metres, and was laid out with circuit paths enclosing a radial path *patte d'oie* design focussed on a large central 'rond'. It is likely that at the focus of the garden layout lay the statue of Hercules that was reported stolen by the *Belfast News Letter* in July 1773:

'Stolen out of Purdysburn Garden on the night of 16th July instant, the figure of Hercules, with his club in lead, which stood on a freestone pedestal. Whoever discovers the thief and prosecutes to conviction within three months from the date thereof, will be paid a reward of five guineas by the executors of the late Hill Wilson. Dated July 19th, 1773'.⁶

The gardens at Purdysburn that were created in this 1735-45 period were entirely typical of the type of geometric formal gardens that were commonly associated with country houses in both Ireland and Great Britain from the 1660s until the 1740s. Sometimes these formal country house layouts covered very extensive areas around



Fig. 1. Purdysburn house as depicted on Kennedy's 'Map of County Down', dated 1755. The demesne lies adjacent to what was then the main road from Lisburn to Belfast. Immediately to the north lies Belvoir Park, the home of Arthur Hill, first Viscount Dungannon (1694-1771).



Fig. 2. First edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map (Sheet 9, Co. Down, 1834) of Purdysburn house and gardens. By this stage the old house had been remodelled, but the old 18th century *patte d'oie* bosquet garden below the house survived much as created during the late 1730s-early 1740s.

the mansion, as was indeed the case at the adjacent property of Belvoir, which had an elaborate geometric garden network of enclosures incorporating pleached avenues, allees, terraces, bosquets, formal groves, long ponds or canals and other features.⁷

A standard component of these layouts, both in the British Isles and across Europe, was a square or rectangular bouquet such as was created at Purdysburn. These were characterised by radiating paths either in the form of a St Andrew's Cross or in what is technically called a *patte d'oie* layout, that is to say a design in which between five to eight paths radiate out from a central point, so called from its resemblance to a goose's foot. It has been argued that such layouts derived from continental Renaissance town schemes where roads converged into a single space or feature, but in reality they were a practical way of formally dividing up a garden space to incorporate hedges with ornaments placed at focal points.

Undoubtedly the best example of this type of formal garden that survives in both Great Britain and Ireland is at Killruddery near Bray, Co. Wicklow. Known by the descriptive term as 'The Angles', this remarkable feature dates to the 1680s and was laid out by Captain Edward Brabazon (1638-1707), who succeeded his brother as the fourth Earl of Meath in 1684/5. 'The Angles' comprises two adjoining and connected *patte d'oie* bosquets, consisting of radiating grass walks (originally these were of gravel) flanked by tall clipped hedges of yew, beech, hornbeam and lime, punctuated by occasional lime trees and decorated with statues at the intersections. Notably,



Fig. 3. Photograph of the formal *patte d'oie* layout at Killruddery, Co. Wicklow, known as 'The Angles' created for the 4th Earl of Meath during the 1680s. The old clipping lines within these hedges show that in the 18th century they were kept at a much lower level than their present height.



Fig. 4. Detail from a primitive perspective painting c.1735-40 showing the improvements of Col. Dudley Cosby (d.1729) and those of his son Pole Cosby (1703-66) at Stradbally, Co. Leix (Queen's County). The co-joined *patte d'oie* bosquets with their clipped hedges have statues at the intersections.

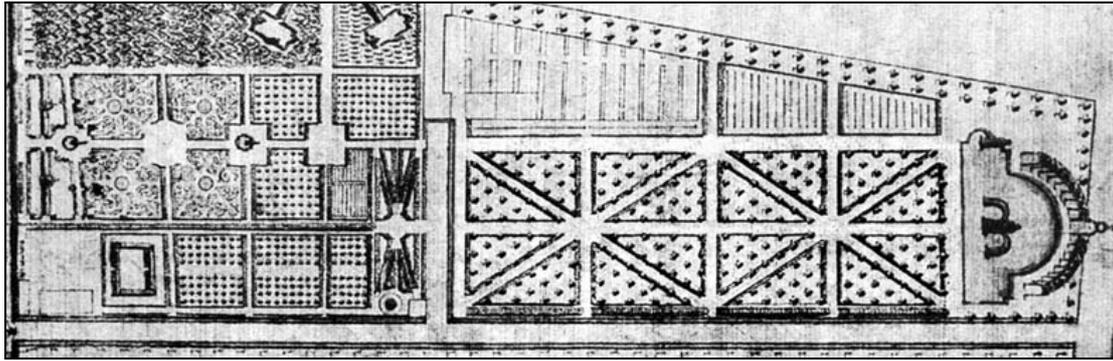


Fig. 5. The Summer Gardens at St Petersburg, Russia, from a plan dated 1714 by Jan Rossen, showing the *patte d'oie* bosquets on the right (Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences) ⁸

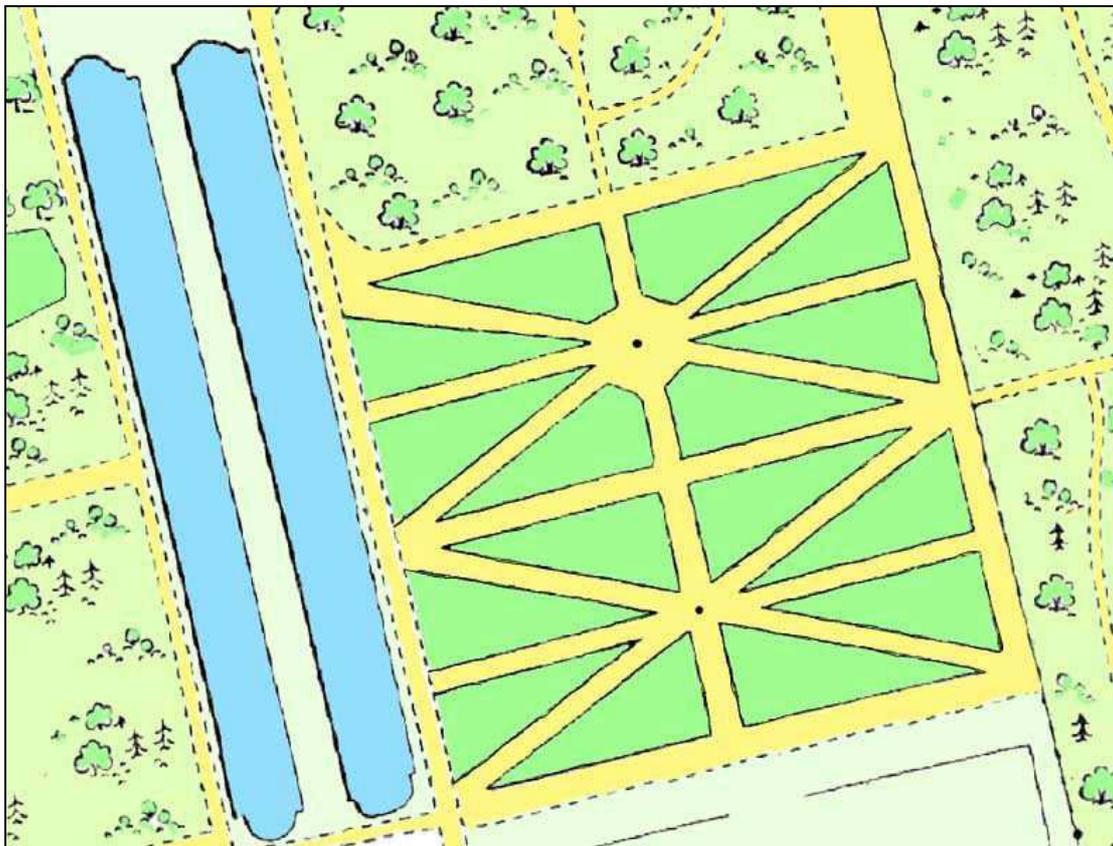


Fig. 6. The adjoining *patte d'oie* bosquets, known as 'The Angles' at Killruddery, Co. Wicklow as shown on the 1908 Ordnance Survey 25-inch map (coloured for this paper). Originally, these bosquets were flanked between a labyrinth (a form of maze composed of clipped hedges) elements of which still survived on this 1908 map and a bowling green with sunken lawn at the south end (just visible on the bottom of the above plan). The pair of canals or long ponds are 550 feet in length. A 'Wilderness wood' (ornamental grove) lies on the west side of the canals.

many of the original hedge trees survive and bear testimony to the different clipping regimes in the 18th and 19th centuries. As the garden historian Patrick Bowe remarked of 'The Angles' in 1986:

'Groups of friends could walk, meet and separate, and then have the pleasure of meeting and separating again. The use of different material for the Angles gives variety to the design - yew for the outer hedges, hornbeam for the inner ones, and lime for the central walk. The effect is bewitching on a bright May day when the leaves are freshly green'.

More recently Tim Longville in *Country Life* wrote of 'The Angles' at Killruddery:

'Here in the 17th century, guests would have strolled and gossiped, discussed business or politics, fallen out or flirted, because this was very much a 'public' garden, as much for visitors as for the owners, hence designed both to impress and to entertain'⁹

Following Hill Willson's death on July 9th 1773, the house and gardens at Purdysburn appear to have been neglected. Hill's eldest son Captain James Willson (1734-1812), for reasons not entirely clear, had been disinherited by his father, though he was to achieve in his own right a successful political career as MP for Taghmon (1768-76) and Co. Antrim (1776-83); he was also Mayor of Carrickfergus and Governor of the Hibernian Society.¹⁰ This meant that Hill Willson's second son, also called Hill, inherited the property. However, Hill had little interest in the house and demesne at Purdysburn and seems to have preferred to stay at the Donegall Arms in Belfast, where he is recorded as having shot a burglar who had entered his bedroom there.¹¹ The contents of the house were sold by public auction in 1785 and the mansion was leased by Hill to the English clergyman, Rev. William Dickson, the Bishop of Down and Connor (1784-1804). The bishop, known to many in his own time as the 'Home Rule Bishop', because of his strong opposition to the proposed Union of Great Britain and Ireland, is known to have lived at Purdysburn until the outbreak of the 1798 Rebellion with the mansion acting as the de-facto palace during his stay; subsequently, he retreated to the Bank Buildings in Castle Place in Belfast. The property was then (in 1799) advertised for auction, but appears to have not been sold and left vacant, while the demesne land was let for short terms. Eventually, the property was purchased in 1811 by the successful Belfast merchant and banker, Narcissus Batt (1767-1840).



Fig. 7. 'Purdys Burn. The Seat of Narcissus Batt Esq'. Engraving of the west front of the new Tudor style house looking across the park from a drawing by Joseph Molloy and published by F.K. Proctor, London and Morgan Jellett, Belfast (1832).

Nineteenth Century Purdysburn

Having evidently laid vacant for over a decade, the house at Purdysburn was purchased together with its demesne in 1811 by a Belfast merchant and banker, Narcissus Batt (1767-1840). Our knowledge about Batt derives largely the writings of his grandson, who was an enthusiastic antiquarian and author and was not shy writing about himself and family.

The Batt family, who had Cornish origins, traced their Irish descent to one Samuel Batt, merchant, of Wexford from whom, five generations later, descended Captain Robert Batt (1728-83) of the 18th, or Royal Irish Regiment.¹² Captain Batt inherited the family farm house and associated lands at Ozier Hill in the townland of Coolaw, south-east of Taghmon, Co. Wexford, but appears to have settled in Ulster following his marriage in 1765, to Hannah, daughter of Samuel Hyde of Hydebank, Co. Antrim. Narcissus Barr, born in 1767, was the eldest of Captain Batt's five sons, and although in 1783 he inherited the family farm in County Wexford, he remained in Ulster where he was already doing well in business. In 1793 he married Margaret, daughter of the prominent Belfast businessman Thomas Greg. Batt's success lay in banking; he was a founder member of the Belfast Bank (later the Belfast Banking Co) in 1808.¹³

The previous year 1807, Narcissus Batt had purchased the former grand Belfast town house of the second Marquess of Donegall, Donegall House, on what was then called Linenhall Street. In 1811 he purchased Purdysburn, no doubt deciding that he



Fig. 8. The Batt family arms on the wall of one of surviving outbuildings at Purdysburn. It incorporates a cross with three escallop shells (the badge of a pilgrim) on the main post and a bat in each of the four quadrants. The crest at the top comprises a crescent with and an escallop shell. The full motto *virtute et valare luceo non uro* translates 'By virtue and valour I shine, but do not burn'.

needed a country seat outside the city. However, he appears not to have rushed to occupy the building for it was not for another decade that he commissioned an architect to remodel and enlarge the old house. The man chosen for the job appears to have been the well known London Architect Thomas Hopper (1776-1856), who was working in Ulster at the time for the second Earl of Gosford. This is supported by a statement in Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (1837), wherein it was stated that Purdysburn was 'the splendid residence of Narcissus Batt Esq, built after a design by Hopper in 1825 in the Elizabethan style'. On completion of the house, Batt was able to move into his new house that same year.¹⁴

How much Hopper was really responsible for this building is open to debate for it lacks the confidence and sophistication he displayed at Margam Castle in Wales and Wivenhoe Park in Essex, but on the other hand this was quite early in Hopper's career and can be counted among the very earliest examples of the Tudor-Jacobean revival style in Ireland.¹⁵ The new building was a rather awkward stucco-faced gable-ended double pile house comprising a six bay three-storey block with arrays of transomed and mullioned windows, label mouldings, string coursing, plain parapets and an army of tall decorative chimney stacks. Towers with slender octagonal turrets with onion-shaped pinnacles and decorative parapets, accentuated the west and north faces of the building, that on the north end taking the form of a canted bay. The east front facing the gardens was broken by a two bay two-storey recessed centre with an unusual gothic parapet.

In this grand new house Narcissus entertained lavishly for the last fifteen years of his life. Indeed, it was whilst enjoying one of his parties that on 27th January 1840 he fell over the banisters to his death.



Fig. 9. Photograph of around 1900 of the entrance front of the house at Purdysburn as remodelled in a Tudor-Jacobean style for Narcissus Batt during the 1820s

Whilst working on his new house, Narcissus Batt was also engaged upon both the gardens and demesne. New gates and lodges were added during this period, as were Tudoresque-style dwellings in the small estate village at the southern edge of the

demesne. In the garden he built a summer house in the form of a sham medieval tower house, while much of the naturalistic informal park planting shown on the 1830s Ordnance Survey map edition was probably put down during the early decades of the 19th century, including three miniature lakes.

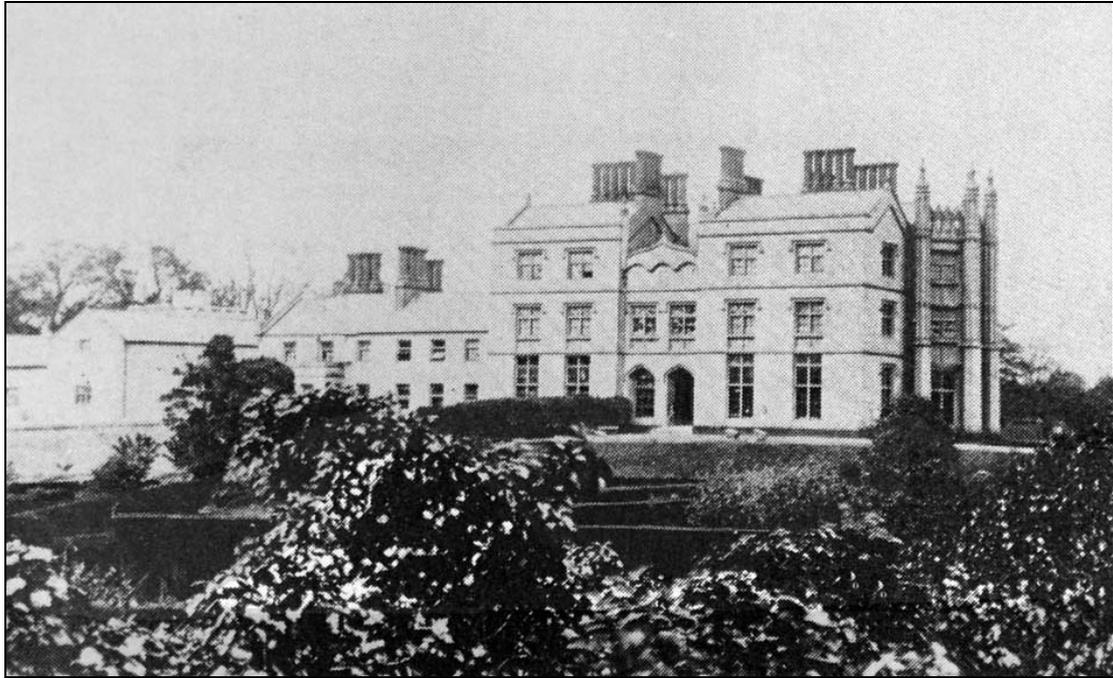


Fig. 10. Purdysburn house (east front) as viewed across the formal garden circa 1900.

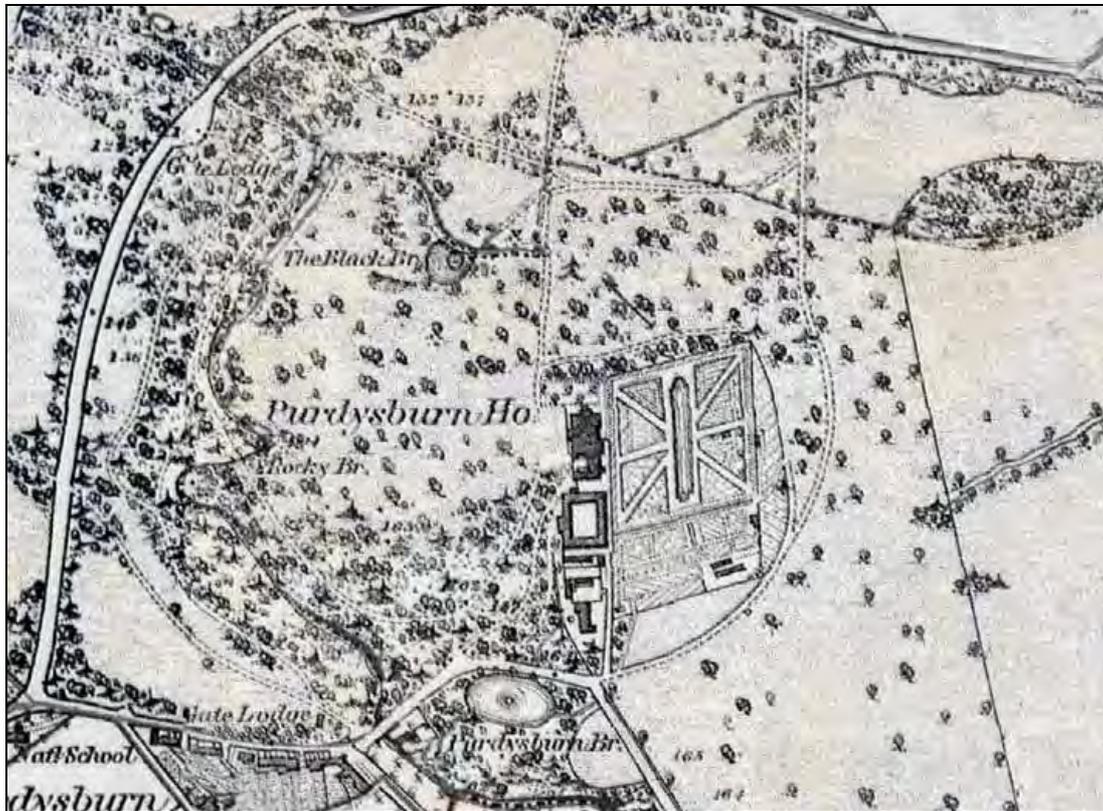


Fig. 11. First revision six-inch Ordnance Survey map (Sheet 9, Co. Down, 1859) of Purdysburn house and gardens. The formal garden was given its central pond around 1840.

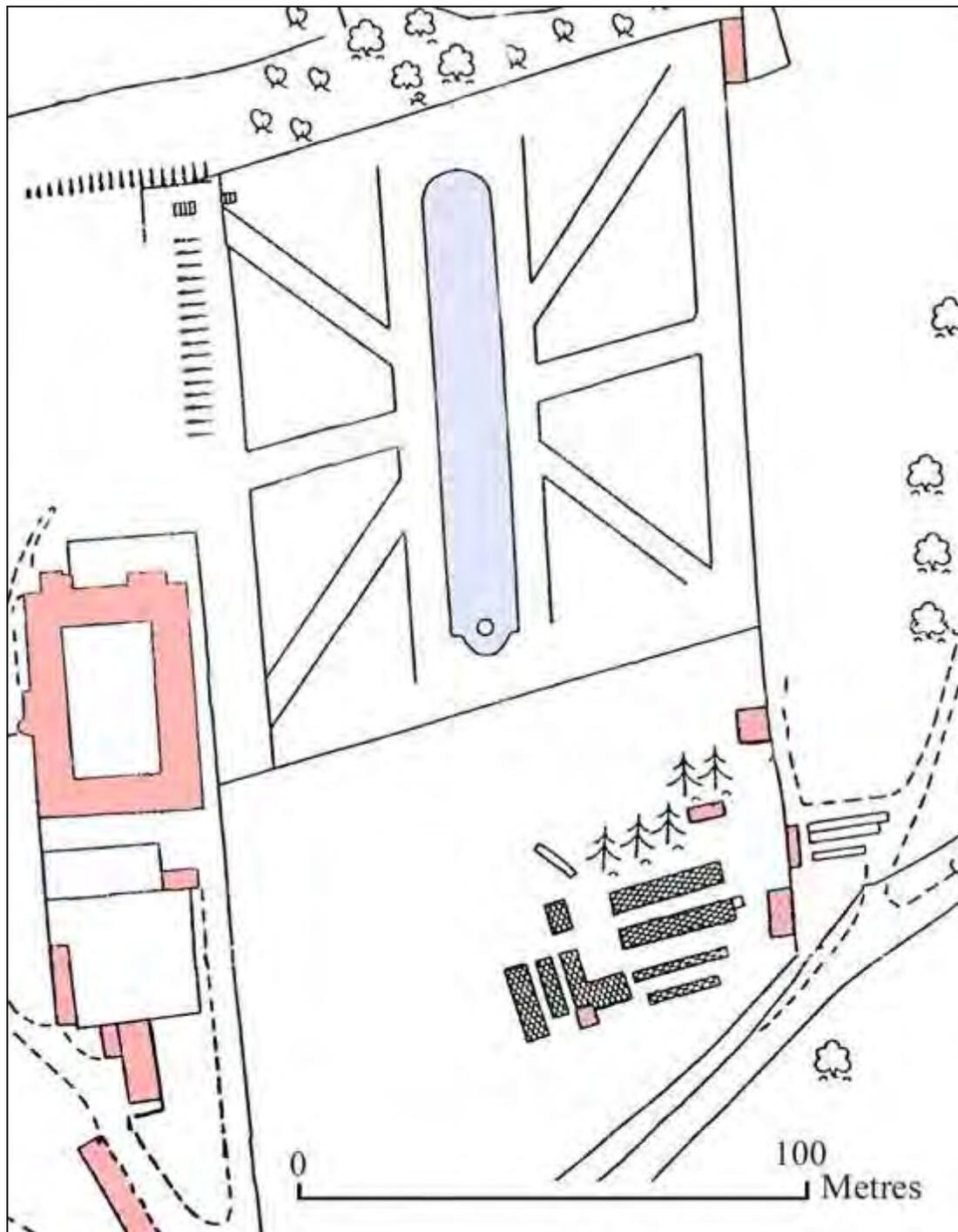


Fig 12. Map of the formal garden on the east side of Purdysburn house, based on Ordnance Survey Map 147-13, dated 1969. The house had been demolished in 1965.

The remodelling of the formal garden below the east facade of the house did not take place until at least the late 1830s or early 1840s. Within the walled garden the old *patte d'oie* layout of radiating paths lined with clipped yew hedges was modified to incorporate a long pond or canal running down the centre, parallel to the east and west outside walls. Rather than spoiling the layout, this addition was very much in keeping with the style of the original historic character of the garden. The yew hedges were retained and adapted, though new hedges were planted alongside the canal with seats placed at intervals on the gravel paths facing the water. Features such as

pergolas were added later in the 19th century as was a pet's cemetery, which was made in the beds alongside the north wall. Headstones for these animals still survive along this wall-face to-day.

Following the death of Narcissus Batt on 1st February 1840, when he was aged seventy-three, the Purdysburn property was inherited by his eldest son, Robert (1795-1866), while his younger son Thomas Gregg Batt purchased nearby Stranmillis in 1857. Upon Robert Batt's death in 1866 Purdysburn passed to his son, Robert Narcissus Batt (1844-1891), a 'hearty and genial sportsman' who had been educated at Harrow and later at Trinity College, Cambridge. He kept a stud for racehorses at Purdysburn and also pursued a passion for greyhound coursing, setting up a club in the park. By this point the demesne was a noted local feature in the district and in Bassett's 1886 *County Down Guide* it was described:

'The chief attractions of Purdysburn are the mansion and demesne...in the demesne are three miniature lakes and yews of immense size. The great charm of the place is the glen through which the burn runs. It is tastefully planted with trees and shrubs and has most inviting walks.'

This description was in many respects the site's swan song. After his daughters had declined the offer of inheriting the property, Robert Narcissus Batt directed that the entire estate should be left to Belfast General Hospital 'for whatever use they saw fit'. In 1894 it was purchased by Belfast Corporation.



Fig. 13. The formal garden at Purdysburn around 1900 taken from the upper windows of the house. It shows the clipped yew hedges, the long pond, the enclosing brick walls with fan-trained fruit and the parkland spread out beyond.

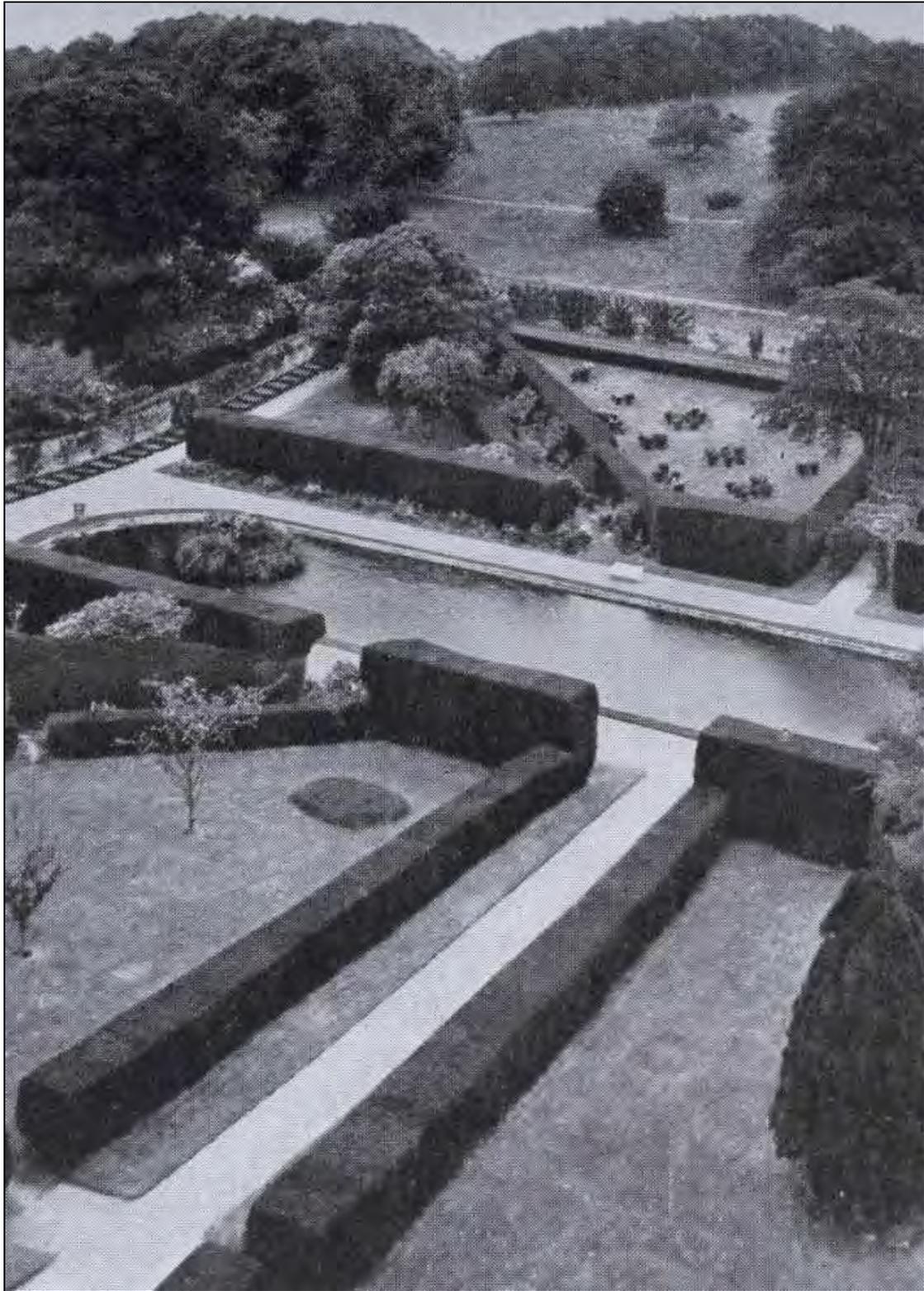


Fig. 14. Detail of photograph dated c1900 depicting the formal *patte d'oie* garden at Purdysburn. Some of clipped yew hedges flank pergolas over the paths (as on the right of this image); some are lined with shrubs, while others have just plain grass edgings to the gravel paths. The brick garden walls support fan-shaped espalier fruit and unusually there are no trees flanking the east side of the garden wall, presumably to allow views into the parkland from the house. The paths around the pond are wider than the others and have a number of seats placed at intervals. The pet's cemetery is set along the north wall.



Fig. 15. Aerial view of the formal garden at Purdysburn as it appeared in 2012 (Google Maps)

Purdysburn after 1894

In 1894 Purdysburn house and demesne was purchased by Belfast Corporation for £29,500 from the Batt family. At the time it comprised 295 acres, but in 1902 additional lands of 88 acres were added, followed by further land purchases in 1904 and subsequent years. In 1900 the Corporation had decided to establish an 'asylum for the lunatic poor' just beyond the demesne on the eastern side of the estate, which was intended to supersede the old County Antrim Asylum off the Grosvenor Road, Belfast. The new complex itself was built on the 'Villa Colony' principle on the advice of the then Medical Superintendent, Dr. William Graham. The buildings were designed by George T. Hine, the Consulting Architect to the English Lunacy Commissioners, 'on a scale for 1,500 patients' with Belfast Architects Tulloch and Fitzsimmons overseeing the building work itself.

Whilst the mental health of citizens was to be taken care of on one side of the grounds, on the opposite side, to the west of what is now Hospital Road (within the demesne proper), physical health was being catered for in the form of a new Infectious Diseases Hospital, the city's first municipal hospital. Built to designs by Young and McKenzie, this opened in 1906; later known as the 'Purdysburn Fever Hospital' and later still 'Belvoir Park Hospital' it continued in use until 2006.

The main portion of the demesne around the house remained largely untouched until August 1965 when the dwelling itself (which had previously been used by both patients and asylum staff) was demolished. With the house gone, new modern-style but rather bland government office blocks were built in the early 1970s, with a prison, Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre and Prison added to the site in 1979. A Territorial Army base was constructed to the north of this around 1988.

The formal *patte d'oie* historic gardens below the old house had been maintained

for the use of hospital patients throughout the first half of the century and so had consequently survived remarkably intact. It was not until the 1960s that they started to fall into decay. At some point during this time the old clipped yew hedges of the garden were stubbed-out and replaced (inappropriately) with fast growing leylandi, which have since predictably grown into very large sizes and now completely dominate the entire gardens. The long pond survives as do the enclosing walls, though at some point in the last century a large section had to be rebuilt. Various schemes to restore the gardens have been proposed over the years, but they remain a rather neglected, but important relic of Ireland's garden heritage.



Fig. 16. View of the summer house against the east wall in the outer garden at Purdysburn, built in the early 19th century as a sham medieval tower house complete with gothic windows.

Notes

1. Deane, D.C. (1999) 'Outdoors with C. Douglas Deane'. *News Letter*, 12th May, 1999.
2. Inscription on a tomb in Drumbeg churchyard 'James Willson of Purdysburn died 1741 aged 68 years and Armanella his wife who died 1740, aged 68 years'.
3. Anon (1901) 'Notes and Queries'. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, second series, vol. 8, no. 1, p50. His children included James, later MP (the eldest who was disinherited); Hill (who inherited Purdysburn); Annabella, Mrs Sharman; Elizabeth, Mrs Rowan of Mount Davys & Eleanor, Mrs Ward.
4. Hill Willson's obituary notice, published in the *Belfast News Letter*, July 1773, read: 'Died on Friday morning the 9th of July, 1773, at Purdysburn in his 66th year of his age, late collector of Belfast, most deservedly lamented of a numerous and respectable acquaintance. He was the eldest justice of the peace in the county of Antrim, which trust he executed with the strictest regard to justice and good order, and at the same time with the greatest of tenderness to the subject, as his influence was such with all ranks of the people as seldom to be obliged to have recourse to the severities of the law. He was interred on Sunday morning in the family burying place at the Drum'.
5. Harris, W. (1744) *The Antient and Present State of the County of Down*. Dublin: printed by A. Reilly, for Edward Exshaw, p72.
6. *Belfast News Letter*, July 19th 1773. It is possible that a pedestal found in the pond was a relic of this statue base.

7. Described in Harris (1744), op cit, p72. See also Simon, B. (2005) *A Treasured Landscape: The Heritage of Belvoir Park*. Belfast, The Forest of Belfast.
8. Ignatieba, M., Melnichuk, I., Cherfantsva, O. and Lukmazova, E. (2015) 'History and restoration of the St. Petersburg Summer Garden: Return to the roots'. *Garden History*, vol. 43, no. 2, pp199-217.
9. Longville, T. (2010) 'A meeting of minds. Killruddery, Co. Wicklow'. *Country Life*, February 10th, pp53-56. For Killruddery see also Malins, E. and Glin, Knight of (1976) *Lost Demesnes. Irish Landscape Gardening, 1660-1845*. London, Barrie and Jenkins, pp10-12; FitzGerald, Desmond (The Knight of Glin) and John Cornforth (1977) 'Killruddery, Co. Wicklow I, II'. *Country Life* col.162, no. 4176 (14 July), pp78-81; vol. 162, no.4177 (21 July), pp146-149; Bowe, P. and George, M. (1986) *The Gardens of Ireland*. London, Hutchinson, pp100-105, chapter on Killruddery. For a useful account of Killruddery, see Butler, P. and Davies, M. (2014) *Wicklow Through the Artist's Eye: An Exploration of County Wicklow's Historic Gardens, c1660-1960*. Dublin, Wordwell, pp16-31.
10. Johnston-Liik, E.M. (2002) *History of the Irish Parliament 1692-1800*. Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, vol. 4, pp542-3. See also Joy, H. (1817) *Historical Collection Relative to the Town of Belfast from the Earliest Period to the Union with Great Britain*. Belfast, George Berwick, pp115, 126, 305. James Willson was left only an annuity by his father. He lived at Galgorm, Co. Antrim.
11. Deane, D.C. (1999) op cit.
12. Rankin, J.F. (1981) *The Heritage of Drumbo*. Ballylesson, Author (see especially chapter viii - 'Purdysburn and the Batt Family'), pp95-104. Also Molloy, J., Proctor, E.K., Heatley, F and Dixon, H. (1983) *Belfast Scenery: In Thirty Views 1832*. Belfast, Linen Hall.
13. Batt, N.G. Rev. (1896) Belfast Sixty Years Ago: Recollections of a Septuagenarian. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, second series, vol. 2, no. 2 (January), pp92-95; see also Tenison, C.N. (1896) 'The Old Belfast Bankers'. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, second series, vol. 2, no. 2 (April), pp161-166.
14. Lewis, S. (1837) *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*. London, Lewis., vol. 1, p494, under 'Knockbreda'. For Hopper see Colvin H. (1995) *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*. Third Edition. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp512-516.
15. The earliest examples of the Elizabethan/Jacobean Revival style in Ireland are Kilcolman (1819), Killruddery (1820-29) and Ormeau House (1823-5), see Reeves-Smyth, T. (2003) 'An Elizabethan Revival House in Ireland'. T. Reeves-Smyth and R. Oram (eds) *Avenues to the Past. Essays Presented to Sir Charles Brett on his 75th Year*. Belfast, Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, pp328-9.



Fig. 17. One of the headstones in the pet's cemetery along the north wall of the garden, this being for a pointer dog called 'Glennie oh', who was 'Born Armagh aged 12½ years' and 'winner of many prizes'

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